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C O N F I D E N T I A L RABAT 001766

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/21/2016
TAGS: [KISL](#) [KIRF](#) [PREL](#) [MO](#)
SUBJECT: MOROCCO'S AMBASSADOR HEADED BACK TO VATICAN

REF: RABAT 1733

Classified by Political Counselor Craig Karp for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Morocco is sending its Ambassador back to the Vatican, five days after recalling him in protest over Pope Benedict's September 12 remarks about Islam. The controversy over the Pope's remarks appears to have already peaked in Morocco. Meanwhile, the state press agency has released for domestic consumption excerpts of the King's initial letter of protest to the Vatican, in which he addresses the Pope as a fellow religious leader and urges tolerance and mutual respect. End summary.

¶2. (U) As reported widely in Moroccan media on September 21, Ambassador Ali Al-Ashour, the GOM's envoy to the Vatican is returning to his post, after being recalled for consultations in the wake of Pope Benedict's controversial September 12 remarks about Islam (reftel).

¶3. (SBU) The move suggests that the controversy in Morocco is past its peak. Observers note international efforts to encourage Muslims to participate in a "worldwide day of protest" has been called to follow Friday prayers, but there are currently no indications that the call will have significant resonance in Morocco.

¶4. (U) Meanwhile, the state-owned Maghreb Arab Press Agency released on September 20 excerpts from King Mohammed VI's initial letter to Pope Benedict, protesting his remarks. The release quoted the King as writing the Pope:

"I am addressing you in your capacity as head of the Catholic Church to ask that you show towards Islam the same respect you display for other divine religions, including Christianity... Islam advocates tolerance between people of all divine religions, and the faith of every Muslim is incomplete unless he or she believes in all prophets...

"To me this is the best way to promote dialogue among religions and cultures... It is our responsibility as guardians... to diffuse the values of peace, coexistence, and rapprochement between nations and peoples, to endeavor to defend these lofty ideals."

¶5. (C) Comment: The King, in his letter to Benedict, addresses the Pontiff as a fellow (or even co-equal) religious leader. Morocco's monarchs have historically derived, and continue to derive, political legitimacy from their assumed religious title as "Commander of the Faithful."

The King's quick and decisive reaction to the controversy over the Papal remarks was clearly intended to shore up his credibility as a defender of Islam and, at the same time, preempt domestic Islamists who might seek to exploit the event to gain ground for themselves. End comment.

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